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CONDITION SCORING OF DAIRY CATTLE

What is condition scoring?

Condition scoring is a method of assessing the body condition or amount of fat reserves an animal is carrying. Rather than classifying animals by eyeballing them, condition scoring is a hands-on technique used to assign a numerical rating to each degree of condition. The scoring system described here was developed by The East of Scotland College of Agriculture. Other systems have been developed and although similar to the system described here will give condition scores slightly different from those arrived at by this method. The reader should be aware of which system is being used when reading about or discussing condition scores.

Why condition score?

Anyone who has ever discussed with another the condition of a particular animal or group of animals knows that disagreements are very common. What is "good" condition to one may be too thin or too fat to another. This can cause problems when one must, for example, describe the condition of an animal to the veterinarian or nutritionist over the phone. Condition scoring is an easy skill to learn which will overcome such problems.

The condition score of a cow at the beginning of a lactation has an influence on the amount of milk that can be expected during that lactation. Cows that calve in good condition produce more milk than cows that are in thinner condition. The following table gives the results of an experiment comparing the production during early lactation of cows differing in condition at calving.

The cows that were in better body condition (condition score = 3) produced more milk at peak production. They also produced more milk during the experiment and consumed less feed. These results are typical of the effects reported in the scientific literature and observed on-farm.

How to condition score

Condition scoring is done by judging the amount of fat cover over the spinous processes or "short ribs" located between the last full rib and hip bone and in the area around the tail head. The amount of fat cover over the ends of the short ribs is the major area to consider in thinner animals (<3) however when these can no longer be felt the emphasis shifts to the tail head area.

Target condition scores

A condition score of 3 at calving time appears to be a reasonable target. In order to have cows calving in this condition the cow should be condition scored two months prior to drying off. This allows time to put extra condition on cows requiring it. Cows gain weight more efficiently and easily while milking than when dry. The cows should be in condition score 3 at drying off and then maintained at this during the dry period.

A cow calving with a condition score of 4 should be watched closely as she is carrying enough fat to cause a problem if she goes off feed. As long as she stays on feed, problems like ketosis and downer cow can usually be avoided. The greatest challenge here is to promote a good appetite and keep her eating well.

Effect of condition score at calving on milk production

	Condition score	
	2	3
Peak milk production (kg/day)	31.7	36.7
Average milk production (kg/day)	27.5	30.0
Fat test (%)	3.98	4.01
Feed intake (kg/day)	19.4	17.8

(Adapted from Land and Leaver)

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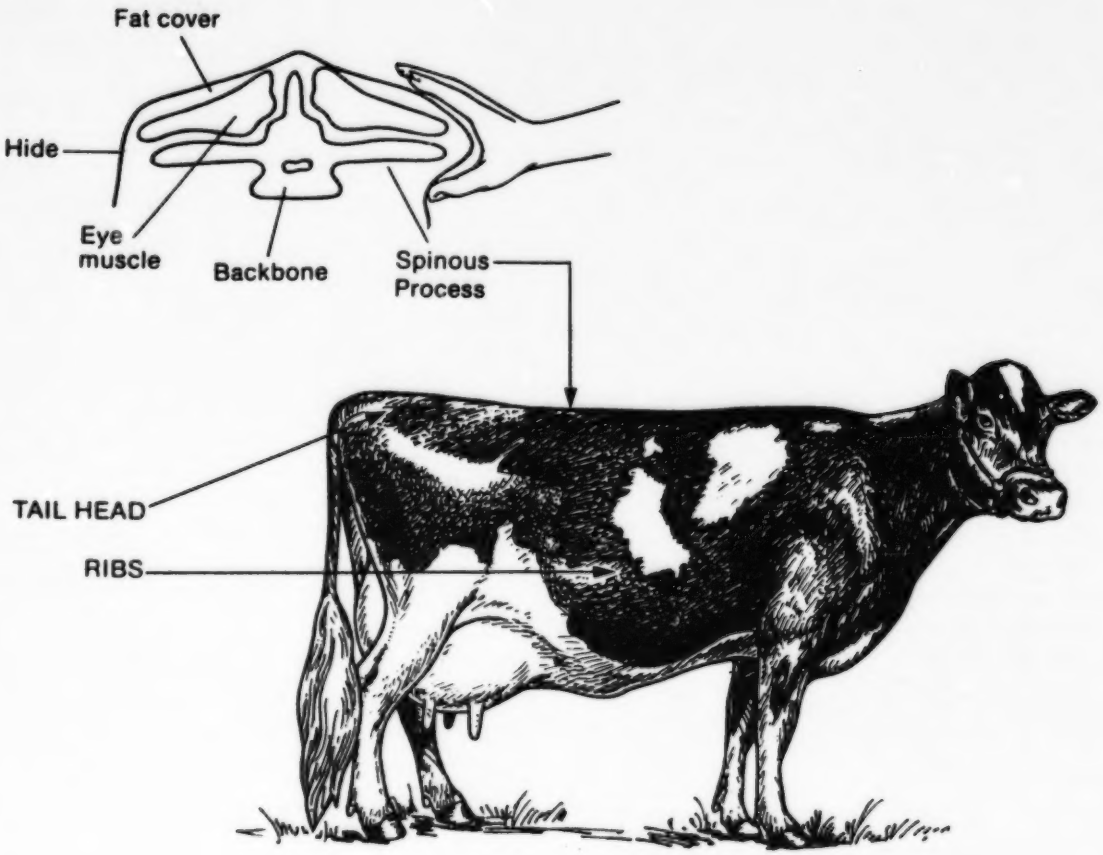

Condition score	Description
1	The individual spinous processes are sharp to the touch and there is no fat around the tail head. The hip bones, tail and ribs are prominent.
2	The spinous processes can be identified individually when touched, but feel rounded rather than sharp. There is some tissue cover around the tail head, over the hip bones and the flank. Individual ribs are no longer visible.
3	The spinous processes can only be felt with firm pressure. The areas on either side of the tail head now have a degree of fat cover which can be easily felt.
4	Fat cover around the tail head is evident as slight "rounds", processes cannot be felt even with firm pressure and folds of fat are beginning to develop over the ribs and thighs of the animal.
5	The bone structure is no longer noticeable and the animal presents a "blocky" appearance. The tail head and hip bones are almost completely buried in fatty tissue and folds of fat are apparent over the ribs and thighs. The spinous processes are completely covered by fat and the animal's mobility is impaired by the large amount of fat carried.

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